

Statement of
Alan Lackey
Coalition for the Valle Vidal
Before the
House Resources Subcommittee
Regarding
Oil and Gas Development of the Valle Vidal
October 27, 2005

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for taking time to hear testimony on this extremely important issue. I also want to thank you for allowing me to present my views of why it is important to protect special places like the Valle Vidal.

I would like to give you some background information about myself so you will have a better understanding of who I am. I was born and raised in a small coal- mining community in Northeastern New Mexico. I am a Republican by nature and by voter registration. I am a life member of the National Rifle Association. I am a business-owner, I am a cattle rancher and I have been a hunting guide for 22 years. In addition I am a founding member of the Coalition for the Valle Vidal.

I am also one of the millions of Americans that plan their entire year around, and count the days until, the next camping, fishing, or hunting excursion somewhere in the backcountry of the nation's public lands.

My first exposures to these lands and some of my fondest memories are from fishing trips with my Dad and brothers to an isolated stream where my granddad used to fish as a young man. After graduating from college I wanted to see the backcountry of the west from the back of a horse. So I got a job as a wrangler, packer and wilderness guide. After spending time in undeveloped, stunningly beautiful wild lands I realized how unique our nation is in this world. Lands set aside in the public trust for all Americans to use, by visionary leaders of the past, gives every citizen pride of ownership and a stake in this great nation.

Before I began ranching full time I was a managing partner of the family business for 16 years. The main economic engine of our community was the coal mine. After a two decade decline of mining in the area, complete closure of the mine was imminent and happened in June of 2003. As a board member, and eventually President, of the local Chamber of Commerce I had an obligation and a duty along with the other board members to develop a strategy to take our town into a new sustainable economic future.

Even a change like the mine closing can be positive. Like many thriving places in the west, our town was blessed with scenic beauty and abundant wildlife that attract people from all over the world. Providing for these visitors presented an opportunity to transition to a more secure economy. As long as there is a beautiful landscape and plentiful wild life, people and companies who value these assets will come. This was the foundation on which we planned to build for the future.

At the same time a new type of natural gas development – coal-bed methane – was poised to over take the region. At first this was encouraging news, and as a businessman I welcomed it. This project promised to provide jobs and give a boost to the area economy which was badly needed. It would also provide new business opportunities for local businesses.

However, as a hunting guide for Vermejo Park Ranch, where coal bed methane development began taking place, I witnessed first hand how this landscape altering activity would compromise our most valuable outdoor assets and put future water resources at risk.

The coal bed methane development I was witnessing was purported to be the most “environmentally sensitive “ever done. I can’t stress enough that the method of coal bed methane drilling on Vermejo Park or any type of coal bed methane drilling would be a disaster for the Valle Vidal. Development would take away the unique wild character of the Valle Vidal for our lifetimes and beyond. No matter how environmentally sensitive the development is, the Valle Vidal would become just another operating gas field.

The Valle Vidal is only 100,000 acres, but as some of the most diverse and beautiful wildlife-rich public lands outside of Yellowstone Park; it is the natural crown jewel of the Carson National Forest and of our state. The Valle Vidal is a king pin of our long-term economic future. The Valle Vidal provides critical winter range for New Mexico’s largest elk herd. A herd of such trophy quality that it is the only once in a lifetime elk hunt in New Mexico and one of two once in a lifetime hunts in the nation. The fishing, camping, hiking and horseback riding draw visitors from around the nation. The Valle Vidal is also a vital agricultural resource providing lush, productive grazing lands for area ranchers. For the last 20 years the Valle Vidal has become an important part of the Philmont Scout Ranch’s training programs. Three thousand young people a year learn wilderness navigation and survival skills plus use the Valle Vidal as an outdoor hands-on classroom to learn about conservation techniques and conservation ethics.

I assumed the gas company already drilling on the neighboring lands would try to get the Valle Vidal opened for coal bed methane drilling. That assumption proved correct and that is why I sit before you today. After seeing first hand, the devastating effects of coal bed methane production; it does not make sense from a business perspective to convert the Valle Vidal to a single industrial use. Why compromise such an important renewable asset for a one time shot at a marginal supply of gas. This development would make as much sense as burning the house the down to stay warm for a night.

There is gas under the eastern 40,000 acres of the Valle Vidal. If a well site was built every 40 acres over the entire eastern side, with each well requiring an average of 1 mile of road, plus all the supporting pipelines, power lines and compressor stations the Forest Service estimates that a total 30 hours of gas can be produced for our nation and it would take 20 years to do it.

The tax revenues Colfax County generates from the sale of goods and services related to tourism are double the amount of tax revenues generated for the county by gas production a recent study indicates. State wide, wildlife related activities generate \$1 billion per year

according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service. The Valle Vidal should be protected from coal bed methane and similar types of resource extraction for the long-term economic diversity and security of our communities and the enrichment of future generations.

What does coal bed methane extraction mean? Using current technology to extract methane gas from coal seams requires the construction of an extensive industrial infrastructure covering entire landscapes. Developing the gas requires thousands of well locations with an extensive network of roads, pipelines, power lines, and compressor stations. Daily traffic of trucks and heavy equipment rumble into once seclude wild landscapes. The extraction process involves the injection of toxic chemicals into the ground water aquifers and the massive removal of billions of gallons of water from our water shed. The extraction of coal bed methane gas is a fairly new process and few studies have been done to determine what the long term effects of this process will have, especially as it relates to water. However this process is going on at an unprecedented rate largely unregulated. Commonsense should warn us that we don't take a chance with a vital resource such as water, especially in an arid state like New Mexico. In the coal bed methane business water is an impediment to production, something to dispose of in order to get the gas.

This massive industrial infrastructure diminishes most types of outdoor experiences. As an example: On a recent hunt my hunter and I prepared for the afternoon hunt by hiking into a grove of aspens high on a ridge next to a series of open parks. This has always been a terrific spot to listen for the bugle of a bull elk. Hearing the bull's bugle allows you to locate the bull and plan a strategy of pursuit. I have hunted from this ridge several times prior to the coal bed methane development but this time all that was heard was the clanking and moans of pump jacks , the whirring of electric motors and the drone of a compressor station. The 50000 people a year that come to enjoy the scenic landscapes of the Valle Vidal will not travel and spend time in our area to picnic under a power line or camp next to a compressor station.

The spider web network of roads, pipeline corridors, and power line right of ways fragment wildlife habitat and compromise security areas that wildlife need for cover and protection. Recent studies have shown that wildlife tends to avoid these heavily used areas. A Wyoming study for instance, recently found a 46 percent decline in Mule Deer numbers in areas developed for coal bed methane.

When all is said and done whether coal bed methane development is being "done right" or just being done the cheapest way possible the net result is the same. The Valle Vidal would turn into an industrial zone and in the long term our economy and our spirits would suffer.

I fully understand our nation's energy needs. Supporting The Valle Vidal Protection Act does not affect our nation's supply of natural gas in any significant way. The Valle Vidal

is 1.5% of the of the 2.6 million acre Raton Basin. Most of the Raton Basin is open for exploration and hundreds of thousands of acres are already under production. Supporting The Valle Vidal Protection Act means taking a balanced, reasonable approach to resource use and allows economic diversity for the communities that surround the Valle Vidal. The gas field jobs will still be there. Energy will continue to be produce for our nation from the remaining 2,560,000 acres in the Raton Basin. But, in addition to the boom and bust gas field economy there will be an economy thriving around providing goods and services to people that make the Valle Vidal their vacation destination. In short protecting the Valle Vidal means economic diversity and security plus peace of mind for our local communities. It just makes good business sense.

New Mexico is contributing its share to the nation's energy supply. We are the second largest producer of natural gas. In fact 98% of lands that contain oil or gas within the Cason National Forest have already been leased for or are under production.

I refuse to believe that we are as desperate as a nation that we are willing to drill every last nook and cranny of our last remaining wild lands for the last drop of oil or cubic foot of gas. I refuse to believe that we are defining the value of our lands by only what can be extracted from them. To me this mind set is like valuing the worth of a human being only by what products of value can be rendered from flesh and bone.

The Valle Vidal Protection Act will protect a small chunk of wild landscape. In doing so it will protect a wildlife haven and a source of clean fresh water. The Valle Vidal will always be a place where America's youth through the Scouting experience, can test their mettle, shape their character and become confident leaders of tomorrow.

Teddy Roosevelt once said, "The conservation of natural resources is the fundamental problem. Unless we solve that problem, it will avail us little to solve all others."

I ask you to please support the Valle Vidal Protection Act.

Thank you again for this opportunity to present my views.

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